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ABSTRACT

The Flexible Business Language Curriculum is a curriculum model designed for customization of foreign language instruction for businesses and commercial organizations. It uses traditional language content areas (grammar and functions) but in contexts less familiar to language teachers. The model is based on the communicative approach, with emphasis on skills needed for both oral and written communication. Steps in design of a curriculum based on this model include: analysis of all relevant material in the language content areas (grammar, functions, situations, and vocabulary); listing of functions and vocabulary for each business situation to be incorporated; identification and listing of grammar necessary to use the functions and handle the situations at the individual student's level; and listing of activities and resources for each situation. Advantages of this approach include: choice of only the situations of greatest interest and need to the learners; reduced lead time for course organization; and potential for criterion-referenced testing. Limitations include too much flexibility for some teaching contexts and lack of sequential programming in grammar. Appended materials include lists of grammatical constructions, functions/skills, and topics/vocabulary for beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels of instruction; a list of business communication situations; and a sample curriculum organization. (MSE)

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INCORPORATING FLEXIBILITY INTO BUSINESS LANGUAGE CURRICULUMS

by Virginia Gorman

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INCORPORATING FLEXIBILITY INTO BUSINESS LANGUAGE CURRICULUMS

The increase in international business activities and advances in international telecommunications has resulted in a corresponding increase in demand for foreign language programs designed for businesses and commercial organizations. These customized courses are difficult to standardize, unlike more traditional language courses. The result is that they often are either too rigid or have too little structure.

Related to this problem are two different sets of goals that often exist in these courses: 1) students want to study only the language they will need in coping in specific situations, and; 2) administrators need to justify program expenditures which often means a detailed syllabus in the traditional sense. This paper will present a model for a curriculum which gives structure and detail needed to justify the contract, while incorporating flexibility needed to meet the varying needs of the different groups of students.

The Flexible Business Language Curriculum (FBLC) model is a modification of the curriculum design process used at the Centro Cultural Costarricense-Norteamericano (CCCN) in San Jose, Costa Rica, for custom designed intensive academic English programs. Modifications of this process were then made to meet the needs of the Extension Program, a program of custom designed courses for individual business organizations.

There were two factors that made modifications necessary for the Extension programs. The first was the pressure from the administration to standardize programs so that less resources and time would be needed to design courses and submit program proposals for contracts. The second factor was the lack of business expertise on the part of the teachers and curriculum designers.

The FBLC model for customized courses uses those traditional content areas teachers may know (grammar and functions), but used in situations in which they may be less familiar. It uses the communicative approach as its basis. The emphasis is on the skills needed to communicate both orally and written rather than a linguistic or academic study of the language.

DESIGNING THE FBLC

Prior to organizing the FBLC, the curriculum designer needs to analyze all content areas: grammar, functions, situations, and vocabulary. The working definition of functions, grammar, and situations in this paper may be somewhat broader than the traditional definition. Functions used here are the language acts and communication skills needed to function in a specific situation or set of circumstances. Grammar is those linguistic structures used

in the communicative process. Situations are the environments and set of circumstances in which it is necessary that the student communicate in a foreign language.

The curriculum designer first lists all possible grammar and functions for the corresponding levels in the program. As seen in Exhibits 1 and 2, grammar and functions are divided into Beginner, Intermediate, and Advanced. If a program were divided into 5 levels, the same thing could be done listing grammar and functions for each of the five levels.

In order to have options, and therefore, flexibility, it is important that ALL possible grammar and function contents are listed, even though each item may or may not be needed or used for a particular course or program. This list may be compiled using program texts, student needs evaluations, experienced teachers, previous curriculums, etc.

The next step is to list the various situations students will be faced with, and topics/vocabulary that would be needed to function in those situations (Exhibits 3 and 4). These could be further categorized according to types of programs; i.e. professional development, marketing, upper management, secretaries, energy industry. Curriculum designers can consult business texts, students' needs analysis, personnel/management offices, and business experts and professional organizations for these last two lists.

After each of the components has been established, the curriculum can be organized. The FBLC is organized around the business situations. Traditional grammar-based or functional curriculums tend to be too rigid to meet the needs and limitations in teaching customized courses to business. Circumstances often force employees to miss classes. Because of the sequential nature of these traditional curriculums, missed classes disrupt both the student's and the class's progress. A curriculum based on situations gives the teacher the flexibility to reintroduce grammar and functions that part of the class may have missed, while introducing new material to those who have already mastered these areas in another situation.

For each situation, the functions and topics/vocabulary that are necessary to cope with those situations are listed. The same functions and topics/vocabulary can be listed under many situations. For example, the function of greetings can be introduced in the situation "greeting clients" and then reinforced in the situation "going to a conference". As in the content lists, it is important to list ALL possible functions and topics/vocabulary that will be used in a certain situation whether each item will be used or not. This gives the teacher more choices. Unlike the content lists, however, only those functions and vocabulary/topics that relate to that situation should be listed. For example, it would be inappropriate to include "making airline reservations" under the situation "making presentations to superiors".

The next step is to identify and list those grammar

points necessary to use the functions and to handle the situation at the level of the student. Steven J. Molinsky (1990) uses a grid in which each function is listed in one column and the corresponding grammar involved in that function is listed in a column next to it. This may be helpful when first writing the curriculum.

After the situations have been organized, and the corresponding functions, vocabulary/topics, and grammar have been listed separately, two optional components can be added: a list of activities and a list of resources for each situation. The resources are especially important since there are few commercial language texts which will meet the needs of the custom designed business language course.

Exhibit 5 is a sample of part of an FBLC designed for the Extension Program. Individual situations can then be filed according to program categories. When a proposal is needed, those situations which apply to the program's needs can be retrieved and organized.

DISCUSSION

There are many advantages to using the FBLC. Teachers choose those situations that best meet the needs and interests of the students. The teacher can also choose to work on only those functions and grammar which are: 1) vital for the student to be able to communicate and 2) the weakest for the class. Likewise, these skills can be reinforced by using them in different situations.

Another advantage to using this type of curriculum is that the lead time needed to design a course is much shorter, even though the course is customized. The course can be designed either by a specialist, the proposal writer, or the teacher, depending on the organization. Teachers with limited business background will not have to assess the quality of business materials and resources; the list would be included in the curriculum.

This type of curriculum does allow for a certain degree of accountability and structure. Using the content lists as checklists, criteria reference exams can be written to measure the student's progress. In order to insure the quality of the courses, students' needs should be assessed before the course begins and their progress should be evaluated during and after the course. Changes can be made to parts of the curriculum as the need arises, updating situations and getting rid of those that are not applicable to the student's needs.

There are some circumstances in which the FBLC may not be the ideal curriculum model to use. Some programs may find this model too flexible. There are no assurances built into the model that all content areas will be covered. In order to insure complete coverage of material, either teachers will have to be trained in the use of the curriculum or some measure of program effectiveness will have to be established.

Another limitation of the FBLC is its treatment of

grammar. More traditional programs usually sequence grammar so that a student has a strong basis on which to build. Lack of sequential programming is often the price paid for flexibility. Grammar sequencing is possible within the FBLC model, but only as it develops communication skills needed in the various business situations.

The Flexible Business Language Curriculum works best for custom designed courses which emphasize communication skills (both oral and written) in a foreign language. It gives structure so that standards can be set and maintained, while giving the teacher flexibility so that unique program needs can be met.

Works cited: Molinsky, Steven J. "Tri-dimensional Syllabus Design: Integrating Functions, Topics, and Grammar". Costa Rican Conference of English Teachers, January 25, 1990.

Exhibit 1

GRAMMAR

BEGINNER

To be, have, do
Simple present
noun/verb agreement
present vs. present continuous
negative sentences
contractions
imperative
going to as future
simple past-reg -irreg
organizing paragraphs
adjectives
comparatives
superlatives
the alphabet
word order
numbers
ordinal numbers
yes/no questions
wh- questions
writing sentences
there is/are
pronouns
demonstrative pronouns
possessives
object pronouns
count/mass nouns
plurals
some/any
prepositions of time
prepositions of place
their/there/they're

INTERMEDIATE

simple past
past continuous
present perfect
future (will)
present vs. future vs. present perfect
present perfect continuous
conditional
included questions
reported speech
questions (past)
tag questions
participles (past, present)
sense verbs
modals
infinitives and gerunds
used to
word order
parallel structures (either..or, neither nor)
Intensifiers-so,such
prepositions of time
comparatives-adv.,adj
superlatives-adv.,adj
object pronouns
compound nouns
2-word (phrasal)verbs
relative clauses
hope/think
prefixes/suffixes

ADVANCED

modals
past tenses
perfect tenses
future
conditional
passive voice
combining tenses
relationship between ideas (conjunctions, logical connectors)
noun clauses
adjective clauses
relative clauses
tag questions
indirect questions
reported speech
inverted word order
articles
punctuation
prepositions
singular/plurals
intensifiers-so,such
2-word(phrasal)verbs
noun,verb,adj.formation
gerunds & infinitives

Exhibit 2

FUNCTIONS/SKILLS

BEGINNER

Making introductions
giving personal information
using the phone
greetings, messages, etc...
classroom behavior
describing people/things
describing buildings/rooms, geography, wants/needs
describing job responsibilities habitual activities
using money, making change
reading charts/maps
reading a schedule
making reservations
discussing entertainment/
sports
holidays
reading the newspaper
going to a doctor
buying/selling
stating facts/statistics
using a dictionary
non-verbal communication
correcting
indicating understanding/misunderstanding getting attention

Greetings
filling our forms
addresses, dates, spelling,
names, nationalities
talking about the family
describing clothes
giving directions
giving instructions
giving/asking time
eating out/ordering food
giving, receiving, answering
invitations
small talk at parties, meetings
the post office
emergencies
expressing satisfaction/
dissatisfaction
rephrasing/rewording
asking for clarification
asking for repetition

INTERMEDIATE

Introductions
describing things/people
interrupting
non-verbal, intonational cues
hesitation techniques
rewording
describing job/work place
writing instructions
describing events
giving statistics
fear/worry/anxiety
making a call
communicating /making plans
giving/receiving suggestions
expressing intention
making reservations

giving/getting information
starting/maintaining/ending
conversations
interviewing
making small talk
correcting
giving/getting instructions
talking about your past
reporting accidents/crimes/
incidences
verifying/clarifying info
taking/giving a message
giving opinions
making a request
giving orders
making transactions

making/giving a schedule
focusing conversation
problem-solving in English
persuasion
linear presentation of ideas
writing a memo
outlining
skimming/scanning
conducting a meeting
denying/admitting
giving a presentation
elaborating ideas
using a dictionary
writing a business letter
English rhetoric styles

ADVANCED

asking for/receiving/clarifying information
describing situations/events/people/customs
making small talk
filling out forms
illiciting information
asking for assistance
speaking politely
starting/maintaining/ending a conversation
meeting/greeting people
talking about the past
focusing attention
hesitating
expanding ideas
asking for favors
making telephone calls
giving/receiving messages/directions/instructions/advice
making plans
cancelling
reading maps/schedules
negotiating
problem solving
giving opinions
expressing doubt/uncertainty
giving a presentation
debating
making/supporting decisions
warnings/prohibitions
writing reports
letters of inquiries
invitations
linear presentation of ideas
note-taking
making reservations/placing orders
expressing intentions
persuasion
interviewing
agreeing/disagreeing
complaining
talking about strengths and weaknesses
making transactions
spelling
sources of information/doing research
analytical reading
English rhetoric styles
reading the newspaper
/magazines register (formal vs. informal) business
practices/ethics social customs appropriate
discussion topics conducting meetings/leading
discussions/group roles
cultural bias in language
goal setting/expression
giving alternatives
inferring data
making predictions
making predictions
drawing conclusions
effective listening skills

Exhibit 3

TOPICS/VOCABULARY

BEGINNER

Professions/job titles/departments
Export/import products/industries
Colors/shapes/sizes
Physical environment (Geography, weather, buildings)
Entertainment/leisure/recreation/sports
Transportation (airport, train, car, bus systems)
Male/female roles
Statistical information
Nationalities/religions
Money/currency
Classroom terminology
Medicines and remedies
Body parts
Benefits (job)
Personal Information (Name, age, address, etc...)
Locations
Family members
Food and restaurants
Holidays
Hotels
Government
Measurements
Industry basics
Feelings
Clothes
Signs and symbols
Newspaper sections

INTERMEDIATE

Student generated topics/vocabulary
Industry specific (i.e. Banking, Energy, Agricultural)
Bribery/ethics
Healthcare system
Government/politics
Male/Female roles
Food and restaurants
Communications: TV, radio, newspaper, fax, telephone
Transportation: Airport, train station, bus station, roadways
Work processes (i.e. machines)/ Corporate structure
Current events
The education system
Security Systems/police/military
Holiday customs
Physical Characteristics
Classroom terminology
Sports terminology
Idiomatic expressions
Parliamentary procedure
Factual data about the company/country (infrastructure, government, geography, etc...)
Advertising
Business customs
The Economy
Working women
Values
Hotels
Personal qualities
Immigration
Tourism
Stereotypes
Housing
Benefits (job)
Business slang
Legal terms
Job skills

ADVANCED

Job responsibilities/industry specific vocabulary
Healthcare system/benefits
Sports vocabulary in business
Current events
Student-generated topics
Ethics/business customs
Commercials/advertising vocabulary
British vs. American English
US customs/culture/values/holiday customs
Folk tales/proverbs/sayings
Urban vs. small town living
Housing/banking/government/educational/transportation/
insurance/welfare systems
Working women and male/female roles
Child labor
Host/home country/company information
Medical terminology
Cultural bias in communication
Personnel testing/training programs
Quality control
Management/marketing cases
Debt for equity (conservation) swaps
Leisure time
Transactions vocabulary
Legal jargon/contracts
Product descriptions/uses/warnings/ingredients
Library/education terminology (degrees, academic subjects,
scholarship/financial aid, educational acronyms)
Parliamentary Procedure
Social customs
Minorities/minority relations
Daily routines/home life
Negotiation
Environmental issues/regulations
Government Acronyms
Famous Speeches
Slang
The economy
The future
The State of the Union

Exhibit 4

SITUATIONS:

Meeting people or receiving clients/guests for business
Job search, hiring, and/or finding a job
Introducing people to the company (clients, investors, etc.)
Finding information for superiors/clients/guests
Making reports to superiors/colleagues
Working with English speakers
Doing business overseas
Traveling for business
Going to a conference
Meeting people in a social setting who are potential business contacts
Exchanging professional information
Studying in the US
Living Overseas
Writing a Professional Paper
Conducting Research
Reporting on a Business Meeting
Giving results of research/work
Traveling for pleasure
Working in English with Non-Native English speakers
Trouble-shooting
Organizing conferences/meetings
Summarizing work
Updating information
Developing company programs
Setting company goals and objectives

Exhibit 5

Sample Curriculum

The curriculum is set up in the following way:

Situation: Common situations faced by business people/students in which they need to use English/foreign language.

Grammar: Possible grammar points that may be covered in class that can be correlated to the business topic for the week.

Functions: Possible functions and communication skills that require practice of the grammar points studied and correlate to the business topic for the week.

Vocabulary: Suggested topics and/or vocabulary lists needed in handling business situation.

Activities: Suggestions for introducing and using material as it relates to the student functioning in the business situation.

Resources: Possible resources or texts for reference or related activities.

CURRICULUM-ADVANCED

SUGGESTED SITUATION SEQUENCE

Meeting people or receiving clients/guests for business
Job search, hiring, and/or finding a job
Introducing people to the company (clients, investors, etc.)
Finding information for superiors/clients/guests
Making reports to superiors/colleagues
Working with English speakers
Doing business overseas
Traveling for business
Going to a conference
Meeting people in a social setting who are potential business contacts
Exchanging professional information
Studying in the US

Situation: Meeting people or receiving clients/guests for business

Grammar: Modals, present perfect, future, simple past, indirect questions, tag questions, adjectives/adjective phrases, sequencing of tenses, 2-word verbs

Functions: Identifying people/objects, giving information, greeting, introductions, giving explanations/directions, starting conversations, clarifying information, register (formal vs. informal), effective listening skills, communicating techniques for other non-native speakers

Vocabulary: Airport, Descriptions of people/things, job responsibilities, factual information about company/country (infrastructure, government, job titles, etc...)

Activities: Role plays, mock conferences, mysteries, giving spontaneous company/country presentations, putting together information packets for visitors, research tasks (compiling lists of translators, services, hotels, etc...), conversation games, video or TV viewing

Resources: National Tourist Boards, company public relations office, Conversation Starters, Prairie Home Companion tapes, CNN International Report.